

Reading guide: Eckert (2005)

Eckert, Penelope. 2005. Variation, convention, and social meaning. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America. Oakland, CA, Jan. 7.

<<http://www.stanford.edu/~eckert/EckertLSA2005.pdf>>

I. Important note on phonetic symbols

Eckert is using a system for transcribing AmEng vowel categories that doesn't directly represent their phonetic values. This is partly because the point of studying these vowel categories is that their pronunciation varies a lot between dialect areas! (You may see this same transcription system used by other sociolinguists, including Bill Labov.)

Symbols used on p 14 (compare vowel chart on p 13):

/ay/ = (started out as) diphthong, low to high front unrounded (IPA [aj])

/ae/ = (started out as) low front unrounded vowel (IPA [æ])

/o/ = (started out as) LOW BACK vowel (IPA [ɑ])

/oh/ = (started out as) MID BACK LAX rounded vowel (IPA [ɔ])

/e/ = (started out as) MID FRONT LAX unrounded vowel (IPA [ɛ])

/uh/ = (started out as) MID CENTRAL unrounded vowel (IPA [ʌ])

II. Questions to consider in preparation for class discussion

- (1) What are the “three waves” of sociolinguistic research that Eckert describes?
 - What kinds of questions have researchers investigated in each “wave”?
 - What kinds of research methods are used?
- (2) What does Figure 1 show about language in New York City in the 1960s? At the time of this study, how did researchers view the relationship between language patterns and social prestige?
- (3) What additional perspectives did the studies on Martha’s Vineyard, Ucieda, the Guyana plantation community, and the language of white Detroit-area high school students shed on the relationship between language and prestige, as compared to the NYC study?
 - Pay particular attention to the figures in this section. Think about what information they show, and what conclusions have been drawn from that information.
- (4) What does Eckert argue that the “third wave” studies and examples in section 4 show about the ability of a speaker to “construct an identity”?
 - Do the phenomena that Eckert discusses in her paper have implications for social questions such as the teaching of Standard English skills in schools where the population tends to speak a different dialect?